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JOURNEY TO ISIDORE

AUGUSTE COMTE'S UTOPIAN METHOD

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Abstract. If Auguste Comte is known as the inventor of sociology, he is less well known as utopian thinker. Indeed recent surveys and discussions of utopism exclude his work entirely. This article examines Comte's division of methods into objective and subjective and his recourse to utopia. Three major concepts were introduced by Comte in his utopian projet: altruism, sociocracy and the religion of Humanity. The author investigates the consequence of such an endeavour for Comte's own science of sociology.

Keywords: altruism, Auguste Comte, continuity, fetishism, humanity, sociocracy, sociology, utopia.

Résumé. Si Auguste Comte est connu pour être l'inventeur de la sociologie, on sait moins qu'il fut également un penseur de l'utopie. Aucun des travaux récents sur l'utopisme ne le mentionne. L'article examine la distinction qu'il introduit entre méthode objective et méthode subjective ainsi que son recours à l'idée d'utopie. Trois notions-clés sont impliquées dans le projet utopique de Comte: celles d'altruisme, de sociocratie et de religion de l'Humanité. L'auteur analyse les conséquences d'une telle entreprise sur la sociologie comtienne.

Mots-clés: altruisme, Auguste Comte, continuité, fétichisme, humanité, sociocratie, sociologie, utopie.

The literature on the topic of utopia is rich and extensive as are the number of utopias composed, yet Auguste Comte's contribution is curiously absent from the contemporary debate¹. It is curious for a number of reasons, not least because his was a major contribution both to the utopian method and within the sociological tradition his utopia was the first and most carefully crafted. The exclusion of his work is total: not a mention in Ruth Levitas (2013), or in Frederic Jameson (2005), and hardly a mention in Krishnan Kumar (1991—these three authors form the basis of the discussion that follows). This was not the case when H. G. Wells wrote his *A Modern Utopia* (2005 [1905]) and advocated the method of utopia as the key to any successful sociology, a judgement recently supported and advocated by Levitas.

What is it in Comte that suggests that either his work is no longer needed and thus forgotten, or that it contains something so horrific that it is best avoided? Even if it contained profound errors of a misguided even dangerous project, this in itself might be something to learn from²: it is currently in the *oubliette* and we can even now put a name to this place. Perhaps Gray in his devastating attack on attempts to realise utopias in the modern world has found a way of recovering Comte, but only to launch another clinical condemnation on both Comte and Friedrich Hayek as mirroring each other (Gray, 2007, p.129-130).

- 1 Interesting collections of extracts exist, one edited by Gregory Claeys and Lyman T. Sargent (1999), and another edited by John Cary (1999), which include sections from Hobbes, Bacon, Rousseau, Voltaire, Saint-Simon, Fourier, Cabet, Marx, of about one hundred extracts, but no Comte—unless some of the passages of Saint-Simon were actually drafted by Comte. Cary in his comments on these brief extracts from Saint-Simon mentions subsequent influences, the *Crédit Mobilier* bank, industrial development, the Suez canal project, but not Comte's sociological utopia (Cary, 1999, p.192).
- 2 Claeys does not refer to Comte as an influence even in his discussion of dystopic utopias (2010b, p.107-131).

I. WHAT IS UTOPIA?

Jameson suggests that utopian thought positions itself in an “enclave”—it has a base, a place, a Garden of Eden, in which an imaginative experiment occurs that corresponds to a desire for a better world. It is not a political blueprint, a programme of action, but it can inspire them and indeed become one. There is a division in types of utopia: on the one hand those that are positioned in the immediate, in the irruptive here and now and those that are planned (see Baudrillard’s critique of Marxism [1975 (1973) et 2007] on this distinction and his arguments clearly apply to Comte, deferring utopia is the key source of hierocratic power). It is, as an exercise in what Levitas calls “the imaginative reconstruction of society” that conjures up a different world.

Here I suggest that utopia is either a *eutopia*, a world considered a better world, or a *dystopia*, a worse one. But there is also an *atopia* (as suggested by Roland Barthes to indicate an ungraspable world that is constantly surprising and unpredictable, as if it had no structure.) Max Weber famously described his “ideal type” as a kind of utopia—a formation that did not exist in any concrete historical case but was a kind of idealisation that could be used as an abstraction for comparison with real concrete instances; such an abstraction has in this sense a utopian dimension. But Weber limits his discussion to a range of such types, such as a bureaucracy, and it is simply a list of elements. In fact this use is rather like the idea in Comte of fictions used in mathematics and science that disappear into the analysis. Yet Weber also suggested the use of fiction in the hypothetical experiment where history could have gone a different way³. A utopia on the other hand is the depiction of a society with specific features, people, institutions, and a way of life that stands on its own. Levitas argues that it is precisely because it is holistic that it is valuable. A reader would recognise the way the author has framed these features as different from and better than any actual living social system. There are at

3 See Talcott Parsons, 1964 (1937), p.610-624. It is a kind of “virtual history”, as discussed in Richard Evans (2015); in the kind of “virtual history” exemplified by Niall Ferguson’s collection (1997), there is no connection with utopian writing, or even Weber’s counterfactual thinking.

least two inspired by Comte, one called *Altruria*⁴ and one called *Herland*⁵. An interesting outline of a possible Comtean utopian novel was suggested to George Eliot (1990, p.241-248) by Frederic Harrison in 1866, but this challenge was not taken up. These are written either as a eutopia or dystopia (a warning or critique), but then these aspects can change, be reversed: started as a eutopia, *Brave New World* became a dystopia. Elementary techniques are ones of exaggeration, additions, substractions, inversions, displacements, new arrangements and so on. Simple predictions, such as that attempted by Daniel Bell (1987) are evidently not utopian in this sense.

In Comte there are clear utopian flights of technological imagination, close to science fiction proper—the most extreme being the correction of aberrations in the earth's orbit, the ultimate positive regulation! (Mill, 1961 [1865], p.192; Wernick, 2001, p.174-176)⁶. A utopian technique is to present biology, for example, as a treatise written in the future (Comte, 2001 [1851-1854], vol.1, p.517). The utopia appealed to some, but was rejected as dystopic by others; it was a utopia that inspired small groups of enthusiasts of the religion of Humanity, some of whom are said to exist to this day in Brazil like a species on the verge of extinction (in 2009 the roof of the Church of Humanity in Rio collapsed after termites had been at work). This was a secular religion, meticulously constructed around a new thirteen month calendar. For Comte Year One is 1789, not the French revolution's own calendar which began in 1793 and was abandoned a decade later, and not the calendar invented by the Saint-Simonians after the death of Saint-Simon himself in 1825, with days of the week named after leaders of the group (Bazard, Rodrigues, and so on). Comte toyed with the idea of replacing the days of the week, with *Maridi* (after marriage) as Monday, and *Humanidi* as Sunday, but he abandoned it (Comte, 1891 [1852], p.104)⁷.

4 See W. D. Howells, "A Traveler from *Altruria*", in Claeys and Sargent, 1999, p.301-311.

5 By Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1979 (1915).

6 On other flights see Braunstein, 2009, p.167-181.

7 The French text (1966 [1852], p.192) does not register this change which is clearly expressed in the English translation (1891 [1852], p.104): "The old names have the advantage of recalling the whole of the past in its three stages".

2. COMTE'S SUBJECTIVE METHOD

As with his work in the objective mode, his thinking in the subjective one is highly inventive. It is in the formulation of the problems of the religion of Humanity that he introduces a number of decisive new terms. Humanity as a concept is not identical with humanity as a species, mankind. It is the product of distinct elaboration by idealisation of the most valued contributions and contributors to human civilization conceived as a vast accumulation of the products of previous generations. But this term was not an isolated innovation; there are three other important concepts.

The first, *altruism*, which is perhaps the major Comtean contribution to the debate on ethics and morals in the second half of the XIXth century, and like the word *sociology* immediately taken up throughout European cultures and beyond. Comte's fundamental critique of liberal individualism is that "the being [...] who loves nothing outside himself, and really lives for himself alone, is by that very fact condemned to pass his life in a miserable alternation of ignoble torpor and uncontrollable excitement" (2001 [1851-1854], vol.1, p.566). The second is very less well known and figured only for a time in sociological discourse: the concept of *sociocracy*. The third, *biocracy* and the "biocratic league" was rarely referred to subsequently. In his account of the transition to the final, positive polity, he wants very clearly to show that there is the appearance of quite new phenomena in previous transitions such as the emergence of the "social" within the Roman transition, and he wants to show the beginnings and evolution of the final sociocratic formation, and its vicissitudes. His thesis is that there has been a major breakdown in the continuity between the mediaeval transition and the oncoming organic crisis of the West: a reconstructed sociocracy, as the internal structure of status transmission, is necessary to resolve the crisis. This theoretical elaboration must be controlled by the theory of human nature: it is not a projection from present trends, but rather a continuation from the lost tradition of Catholic Europe.

Of course, when he discusses the immediate issues of how to attain this goal he begins to construct a programme which takes into account current political and other issues, and this account is clearly “dynamic” and a mix of objective and subjective modes. But the discussion of the utopia itself, even if some parts look as though they are a political programme, pertain to the space-time of a social formation I call here *Isidore*. Indeed Comte begins to live in his utopia when he writes, he says, “posthumously”. Given this characterisation of Comte’s project, it is clear that the crucial concept is that of sociocracy, the social structure of the positive polity⁸.

Very simply however, if sociocracy is the rule by social scientists, or by a stratum of governors counselled by social scientists, who appoint their own successors (not by birth or election), the field of variation of the concept is a large one. Comte’s own specific version, modelled on the Catholic-Feudal separation of spiritual and temporal authorities, is only one possible version. The Catholic Middle Ages was, he admitted, a unique form of monotheism, a form not found in Orthodox Christianity or Islam. It was, he claimed, a result of a conjunctural situation⁹. The sociocracy it introduced secured in a new way the triumph of “continuity” and social reproduction, over the simple “solidarity” of elements of the social system. But this new system disintegrated leaving a society in permanent crisis. This crisis exploded finally in the Revolution in France when the underlying antagonisms became acute.

8 This term has dropped out of modern sociology but it was extensively used by sociologists at the end of the XIXth century, particularly by Lester Ward (1893, p.315-331). He used “sociocracy” in order to distinguish between socialism, communism, and liberalism, and his own position—a substantially modified Comteanism.

9 It is at points such as this that Comte’s essential contribution to sociology is to be found; at those points at which the formal, even utopian, logic encounters historical realities, or as Comte would put it abstract theory encounters concrete complication. But this raised acute methodological problems, not at simplified with the introduction of the subjective method, and the more general theory of subjectivity.

3. ISIDORE

Thus a new era began in 1789, and yet with the Calendar of the Revolution a grave conflict of times was installed for some years in Europe, until Napoleon I abandoned the new Calendar in 1805. But what Comte wanted and what figured in the utopia was the cycle of games and festivals which would mark the days, months, and years of the new order. These games and festivals would replace, for a time, the theatre itself. They would re-enact the evolution of “Humanity” in an endless cycle of remembrance, an almost continuous festival, in order to define clearly its “subjective” transcendence over any “objective” individual or group. Each element, strata of society would have its day in relation to its transcendent subjective double¹⁰. This would be organised by the new priesthood, and Comte goes to considerable length to specify in which month, and on which day of the week each ritual would take place. The priesthood would also be in charge of education and health. Education would be organised globally so that the same curriculum would be followed everywhere and taught on the same day throughout the world—this would allow scholars to travel anywhere and be sure that they would not miss any element of the course.

The decisive contribution of the mediaeval period was the separation of the spiritual power of the Church and the temporal powers, thus it too is incorporated subjectively. Comte maintains the Augustinian division with a major shift in mind: all the temporal powers should be reduced to the size of city states. They are not independent of the spiritual power, and controlled as “Intendancies”—that is their principal governors are appointed and accountable to the Priesthood, the High Priest personally.

One of the central aims of the project was to establish the authority of the new priesthood. He wrote on dignity, on purity, on sanctity, on relative poverty. Low status was correlated with impurity, sexual, physical, material. He noted the importance of wealth rejection in the great priesthoods, and its spoliation by wealth. Work in any way connected with the worship of Humanity would always be gratuitous; those that worked for Humanity would be supported

10 Games of chance would no doubt be prohibited, games of mimicry encouraged.

from donations and gifts in order to remain pure. One of the surprising but rarely noticed propositions was that there would be a systematic form of sacred gift exchange on the practices found among the polytheists of Oceania which “show us the real power which this institution may exert” (2001 [1851-1854], vol.2, p.133). He noted the importance of avoidance of sexual activity for high moral status and of a disciplined regime of prayer for moral advance. Avoidance of alcohol, tobacco, and sexual activity would improve health. He noted the importance of the rejection of force, and banned the direct involvement in political power by the priesthood: it would not govern directly (yet somehow it would “reorganise industry” (*ibid.*, p.320). Force was necessary in any state, he said, but force alone would never be effective without moral supremacy.

These are the lessons drawn from his analyses in all his previous voluminous writings, lessons drawn from a comparative analysis of many cultures at many different stages of development. He says he had become the “interpreter” of Humanity, but in fact he had conceived and defined the nature of a new God—and in this sense was bound to provide, despite his own declarations, its ontological metaphysics.

In the Preface to his last completed work, *Synthèse subjective*, Comte says he is writing the work posthumously, imagining himself writing in 1927—he would have been 129 years old. He is “writing in the year 1927, in my eyes the seventy-third year of the normal state” and one can calculate that the first year was 1855. In the *System*, he had announced that the provisional beginning of the final stage was 1789, and the definitive stage would be 1855. He says that imagining himself such clears many of the problems (the metaphysical stage) out of the way which he says “I have been bound always to represent as extinct.” He then quotes a passage from his 1855 *Testament* which says, “occupying my tomb in anticipation, I can henceforth hold to the living a posthumous language, which will the more completely freed from the various prejudices, especially, the scientific prejudices, to which our descendants will not be exposed” (1856, p.ix; see 1896 [1884], p.24)¹¹.

11 The choice of the year 1927 remains something of a mystery. 1827 was the year of Comte's breakdown, attempted suicide and “madness” perhaps an earlier near death experience.

I suggest that this tomb is situated in a place called *Isidore*, the location of Comte's utopia, rather than the less vivid "Republic of the West". It is then rather straightforward to give a picture of this place from Comte's discussion. It is Eurasian, but without large states, there is "France", "Italy", "Germany", but no Italian, German, French states, only City states exist within these frames. The language is Italian throughout. A biocratic league (Humanity takes responsibility for and governs a specific domain of nature) is established with its three fold division of animals, some of which are in the process of status improvement—herbivores en route to becoming carnivores—as the biocracy within Humanity is the preserve of carnivores only (Comte, 2001 [1851-1854], vol.1, p.510; Lévi-Strauss, 2001; Braunstein, 2009, p.174-176¹²). Women now to remain virginal conceive by artificial means or give birth by parthenogenesis, and the sexual drive is sublimated. Population growth has been dramatically reduced. The spiritual powers, priesthood and its functioning (gathering information) are in full evidence. Education and medicine and a large swathe of legal process are now the preserve of the priesthood. There are no universities, and a massive destruction of books is in living memory: all scientific knowledge is condensed into 10 volumes; each priest may possess 100 volumes of the positive library chosen by the Pontiff. A feature of the life of the priesthood is that the High Priest selects a problem to be solved and sets the whole sacerdotal order to work on it¹³. Education requires acquisition at an early age of four or five languages, including Italian, Greek and Latin; and now education begins with the foetus.

12 Michael Crichton's dystopia *Next* (2006) examines a modern biocratic world.

13 Mill was particularly scathing about this suggestion (1961 [1865], p.181-182). Mill's reading of the utopian conceptions is frequently thought to be uniformly negative but this is far from the case. Mill noted the utopian precision of the 33 years (divided into three phases) to the final formation—but seemed to have missed Comte's dream of being there in Paris in 1889 aged 91; for the founder "the crowning act of his career will be the inauguration of the worship [...] of the Great Being, surrounded by deputations from all the elements of the West" (2001 [1851-1854], vol.4, p.437), on the 100th anniversary of the Revolution. If Comte died on 5 September 1857, aged 59, he had lived the inauguration, and the completion of the Revolution, subjectively.

One of the aims of education is to eliminate excessive “personality” in the individual. No hospitals are necessary as illnesses have been dramatically eliminated by the social harmonic balance Positivism has produced. Such illnesses that do appear are treated domestically or by priests (who have evolved a radical new one-cause theory of pathology). Life expectancy has been significantly extended. There is no objective “science” as previously known, this practice has passed into poetry, the *Gai savoir* regenerated. There is no journalism: in its place there are signed posters everywhere. But reading and writing have also largely moved from the material external world, paper, into space itself which is the medium of pure emotion. Cultural life is an eternal cycle of festivals of commemoration.

The theatre repressed during the transition (“it is for Positivism finally to suppress the theatre, as an institution at once irrational and immoral”, *ibid.*, p.384) has returned; Comte’s own highly sensitive appreciation of the revived theatre and opera is clearly in evidence when he prophesised “the repertory of each of the five Western nations supplies a sufficient number of masterpieces, dramatic or musical, to allow of one performance a week throughout the year, without ever condescending to secondary works and without a too frequent recurrence of the great works”—these largely take place in the sacred sphere. And to add some excitement now that the final state has been achieved a controlled revival will take place “in the capital of each intendancy, the Western theatre will bring together five times a week all classes, to enjoy gratuitously the great dramatic productions, not more than two representations of each to be given in the course of the year.” (*ibid.*).

The crucial bedrock of the social conscience is in fact located in the proletariat, the “homogeneous” decisive estate in the system. Working class clubs, and salons, are the basis; he calls them “laboratories” of strong movements of public opinion. The “sociocracy” at the top, the highly educated “heterogeneous” higher stratum of society takes on a strange new form. It is composed of patrician families across the temporal and spiritual spheres. The priesthood is “enthusiastically” supported by women, now the dominant spiritual sex in the family. The family itself has evolved to composite forms so as to include by adoption auxiliaries of various types (domestics, specialists). The priesthood has become a kind of intermediate sex between the masculine temporal power and women,

and clothing would reflect this status (*ibid.*, p.225). The proletariat also supports the priesthood as it oversees the profane sphere of finance and industry¹⁴.

This is a total sociocratic system of the four essential organs (priests, industrialists, proletarians and women). The bourgeoisie comprising lawyers, journalists, speculators and rentiers, a non-productive class, has become extinct; the nation state, and the political class, as known in the metaphysical state, has simply withered away following the period of the dictatorship of the proletariat. Wars have ceased, industry and technology flourish in vast public projects with manufacturing and engineering now under the direct control of the bankers overseen by the priests. Each of the major institutions are strictly meritocratic, not by direct examination or election as the priesthood now allocates agents to functions—always seen as one of its most difficult tasks. The surprising degree of stability of life is such that there are few new scientific discoveries or technological inventions. Modernity, the “modern crisis” has come to an end. Even the Amish have now converted to the post-modern religion of Humanity.

A vast commemoration festival in memory of Isidore-Auguste-Marie-François-Xavier Comte is now a central feature of the round of festivals, occurring on 5 September each year. There is, then, a complete revival of the separation of Church and State as would have been found in the Middle Ages, and which for example Henry VIII, in England ended with spectacular violence. The leading industrialists are all members of the Church of the new religion of Humanity, require its rituals in legitimising their powerful positions, their marriages, their funerals, and their eventual incorporation into Humanity as realised in the cycle of Commemorations of great names. Of course there still exists the profane world, those outside the Church with obligations to its legal order and authorities, and these live in peaceful harmony with the Church community. And there have been some excommunications, where individuals have been thrown into the profane world; and there have been a number of capital executions sanctioned by the High Priest. There are obviously a large number of non-practising believers.

14 Industry is the general term for banking, manufacturing and agriculture.

Interestingly, there has been a rather noticeable shift in the object of worship from direct sociolatry, worship of the Supreme Being itself, to the worship of the Great Fetish, the Earth, now regarded more and more as having been reborn as a living being. Émile Littré recalled that, at the last meeting of the Positive Society he attended, Comte reported that he had sent a “brief” (bref—a Papal instruction) to a member. “From that moment on Comte made himself the High Priest of the Church of Humanity, a Pope, and wrote briefs” (Littré, 1863, p.631). Without knowing it, Littré had attended a meeting in *Isidore*. It was from such small beginnings that *Isidore* came into being, and Comte imagined that it would be fully inaugurated in 1889 (2001 [1851-1854], vol.4, p.437).

4. THE UTOPIA AND THE REAL WORLD

A more complex idea of the law of the three states can come into existence as a result of this reading. As I have suggested, the key use of the utopia, *Isidore*, in Comte’s own project, was to enable sociologists to understand the nature of the metaphysical transition. Because the utopian description is detailed it has been possible of course to check the actual historical sequel with Comte’s predictions—and indeed Littré did that in great detail. And that was a prime, if little known contribution to sociology. What is of interest here however is not that comparison itself, but rather what has happened to the central concept of the metaphysical stage in Comte’s sociology. This is important since the whole construction of the utopia was intended as a point of reference from which clarification of the lived metaphysical state could be understood. As such the central achievement of Comte’s objective sociology remain the lectures on this formation in the *Cours de philosophie positive* written from January 1841 to January 1842, (Lessons 55, 56, and 57, in Comte, 1975 [1830-1842], vol.2, p.380-697). These are located firmly in the real world, even if the chain of presentation of the various series are constructed from a notional future state, which many understood to be some kind of association of *savants*, metaphorically indicated by Comte as a kind of college or “church” or “clerisy” (Knights, 1978).

It is clear that some seismic shift has happened as a result of analysis going into the subjective mode. In fact, for all practical purposes, the metaphysical polity was still effectively dominant in the objective mode. There opened up a gap between the sociologists like Littré and John S. Mill in the objective mode, and those in the subjective mode. Relations between the two groups became bitter as the former read the utopia as a dystopia: Mill wrote that Comte aimed “at establishing (though by moral more than by legal appliances) a despotism of society over the individual surpassing anything contemplated in the political ideal of the most rigid disciplinarian among the ancient philosophers” (1987 [1859], p.75)¹⁵. Certainly in the spiritual corporation Comte wanted the Pontiff to have absolute power. But what had Comte actually achieved in his new analysis of the period 1789-1854, after all these particular phenomena were not dreamt up? In this exposition Comte presents in fact a new continuity, 1789-1854, and then continues directly into three subsequent fictional transition phases to the final state. Is this continuity to be understood from the basic theory previously outlined (that the determinant movement is the progression of science and industry) or are they now related in a different way?

Comte's new sociological analysis tries to pass between outright retrogression and continued revolutionary or liberal democracy. It will harmonise, he said, the work of Joseph de Maistre from the theological tradition, with that of Condorcet from the progressive tradition. It is at this point in the discussion of the utopian method and the theory of this specific utopia that Comte introduces the concept of sociocracy. His exposition of the series is profoundly marred, as many have pointed out, by his omission of the key linking work of Saint-Simon. Strangely, socialism itself is now firmly planted in the decomposing series, being rejected from the utopian synthesis. Now the “progressive” sequence

- 15 Comte's own vision of the scope of regulation was strictly confined to certain limits. The only regulation on labour in France was a law of 1841 which prohibited the employment of children under 8 years old. Comte made no suggestions as to further regulations of conditions of work, but allowed unionisation, and proposed universal education to the age of 21. But, on the other hand, the Jesuit critique of Comte's sociocratic ideas by Henri de Lubac (1995 [1944], p.248-261) brilliantly pinpoints their latent despotic tendencies. Ironically, not long after writing this critique, de Lubac was, in 1950, removed from post and his publications removed from libraries and public distribution on the order of the Jesuit Superior General.

arrives from the industrial base, but the positive movement includes Maistre, phrenology and Comte's own contribution, and that is all (2001 [1851-1854], vol. 3, p. 526-531). There is certainly no possibility of deducing the positive polity by extrapolation from this material, a sleight of hand has occurred. The major "negative" sequence includes the Declaration of the rights of man, Napoleon I, the Catholic revival, militarism in decline, restored monarchy, parliamentarism, socialism, anarchical communism, autocratic repression of workers, the eventual abolition of monarchy in 1848, and the *coup d'État* which cleared the way for positivism (*ibid*, p. 510-526).

What is interesting is that Comte finds it very hard to imagine the emergence of a stable metaphysical polity; these are all variants on a theme of instability and confusion, not *eu-phrenia* but *schizo-phrenia*, the phrenological balance of society itself is disturbed¹⁶. Thus the metaphysical polity is conceived as one that has no stable unique form, there is only one basic systematic and irresolvable antagonism. It is in continual movement. Yet, suddenly, in 1851 the new dictatorship of Napoleon III has at last been established as a stable dictatorship. This is a possible mode of transition to the positive polity—all that is needed is to start the process of transition and for Napoleon III to legitimise Positivism at the head of a League of Religions (combining Jesuits and other willing partners). Comte has figured his training of the positivist priesthood will take too long, and he now radically changed tack. The religion of Humanity will institute the formation of a new church by aligning itself with the believers of certain other religions that have opposed the disorganisation created by the Reformation. The new enemies are the unreformed Protestants, the Deists, the Sceptics and the imperfect scientists (even the positivists attached to the first Comtean doctrine).

The key underlying idea behind Comte's method is to be able to show that the new God will not be a theological or metaphysical one: it is the rising progressive movement itself which is responsible for its creation and appearance. This is why it must have been so unexpected to Comte's readers,

16 On Comte's phrenology as a political metaphor, see Richard Vernon, 1986.

suddenly to find that de Maistre's conservative defence of Catholicism is to be found in the positive series followed only by the works of Comte himself. In effect the argument for the creation of the new God independently of any modification of a theological entity (Christian Deity to Deism for example) is highly artificial and centred strictly on Comte himself—he will not allow that there is a social movement involved at all, where one might expect a reference to the new Christianity of the Saint-Simonians.

Comte has carefully denied any influence from the Saint-Simonians in the Preface to the third volume of the *System*. But if there is no social movement for the new religion where are the believers to be found? Comte provides an answer: the believers already exist. They are the members of the existing proto-socio-cratic religions, especially Catholics. All that is necessary is “to represent the pretended Creator as really a creation, not of man, but of Humanity”. Catholics should worship and “glorify the Virgin as the mystic precursor of Humanity; her adoration will be easily replaced so as to lead Catholic souls, especially those of women, to the Positivist worship.” (Comte, 1901, p.175).

5. THE SUBJECTIVE SYNTHESIS IN THE OBJECTIVE WORLD

Comte's utopian hopes for an immediate mass conversion to the new religion of Humanity were however dashed. He began to sketch out ideas of a new League against “science” on the model of the League against Protestantism, or the League against Napoleon I. It will be an alignment of Positivism with Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, elements of Protestantism, Islam, against “science”. He re-read, after fifteen years, his earlier work, *The Positive Philosophy*, and was so shocked he had to recharge his emotional balance by reading poetry. Gradually he began to argue that the new Religion would be purely poetic and that science itself along with metaphysics and theology would be gradually extinguished. What was valuable in science and the work of scientists would be transformed into poetry.

An immense cycle of cultural history was thus emerging of human culture from fetishism and back to fetishism. But the immediate threat to his new Religion now appeared to come not from competing religions but from the scientists who believed in possible revolutions in knowledge to come. The great centre of the religion of Humanity would not be Paris after all but the holy city of Constantinople. The new League against “science” which has “become detrimental” to progress (Comte, 1901, p.120), would involve Islam directly: he imagined believers would be quickly won over to his new Religion. His ideas became utopian in the most naive sense. Yet there was a certain realism, indeed even a Comtean dry wit, in thinking that the world revolution to the completed universal polity would take at least 700 years to accomplish (*ibid.*, p.111).

6. FORWARDS, SIDEWAYS OR BACKWARDS?

Today it is not possible to accede to Comte’s claim that the religion of Humanity is scientifically valid, demonstrably so. The scientists in Comte’s own time refused to accept the synthesis and its new God as such, and Comte was forced to disassociate himself from them and defined them as a threat to the new Religion. The value of Comte’s last writings and his utopian sociology does not lie in its scientificity as such, but in the fiction-theory of its ideal type *Isidore*. and the new account of the three organic transitions in European history. But what, exactly, is the new spiritual power organised along the lines of the Catholic Church? It could be viewed as the idea of intellectual culture (including science and medicine, etc.) as a version of a new clerisy (Knights, 1978), or more radically as the prototype of a new kind of political organisation, a kind of ideological state formation (Wernick, 2001, p.235). The route to *Isidore* however for Comte was expected to be long and the separation of the two spiritual and temporal powers could only be achieved by careful preparation and realised by guarantees to the independence of the Church in the final phase of the transition. There is therefore liberalism within the polity, just as there was for Hobbes.

After the division of powers takes place, unlike the “Party” in Orwell, the new Church as spiritual authority does not itself govern, it is the highest counsel: it advises power, provides its programme of action, its mottos, and watches over it by enshrining the highest conscience and concern for the welfare of humanity and the cult of “Humanity”. Its structure and culture is profoundly different from that founded on political power or material wealth, devoted to service in practical sense, education and to prayer, rightly termed a kind of psychotechnics by John Tresch (2012, p.276). In the final stage, temporal power is much reduced physically in territorial dimension, politically concentrated into fewer functions and functionaries, and the remaining ministers appointed, not elected (though residual elected elements are envisaged, 2001 [1851-1854] vol.4, p.395), by the existing power holders (on the advice of the Pontiff). Thus there are two powers confronting each other, with the sovereign power residing in the Church as in the final third phase the government is completely won over to the new Religion and its legitimate authority. All this is, as Comte insists, achieved without force or violence, within complete liberty of action: a demonstration of the new status of scientific knowledge suitably transformed. Transformed and, it has to be emphasised, controlled and regulated; a position which H. G. Wells ridiculed, “the intimate texture of his mind was dull and hard, the conception slipped from him [...] his imposition of a rule of life upon the poetical types, who are least able to sustain it, mark how deeply he went under.” (2005 [1905], p.184).

All this is, clearly, utopian even down to the specification of the content and bodily gestures of prayer (all modelled on, or parodies of, Catholicism). Comte justifies this prophecy as science, since the utopia is a genre of hypothesis, fiction necessary to science, a thought experiment. But this particular experiment, given its subjective nature, falls outside of science as it is conventionally understood, and this is why the term Positivism was invented, or at least redefined in the last writings. It includes science on condition it is fused with fetishism, transformed into an organised religion with an affective element, in effect a “religious” secularisation that can in the end be “consecrated” into faith. It opens up the concept of civic duty as a universal prosaic “religion of Humanity” and human rights.

For Comte, the religion of Humanity is not only “universal” in honour of its derivation from Catholicism, but because it celebrates universal human culture, but selectively. The Church remains an “objective” social corporation with entry and exit rituals: individuals are not born into it, but become members and go through a life cycle of ritual stages; yet it is a place of subjective belonging, even perhaps after death when individual souls can literally be incorporated into God.

Above all such a religion is a long training in moral education; the individual is in infinite debt to human culture, and must know that this debt exists¹⁷. The dead increasingly govern the living through the accumulation of the total cultural capital of humanity. Fear and rejection of death and the dead are one of the diseases of the metaphysical state. For positivism an individual exists objectively and subjectively, and after death subjectively in the memory of others; it theorises a history “without names”, as well as a “cult of great human beings”, and so the Supreme Being is constituted by all the anonymous contributions to human culture and by those which are linked to names and peoples¹⁸. “Humanity”, in this conception, is thus transcendent of any one individual or even humanity itself in its objective life at any moment. “To live only, or even chiefly in the present, he says, would be as irrational in philosophy as it is deprived in morality, and it must issue in interminable scepticism” (2001 [1851-1854], vol.2, p.296).

Comte’s priesthood, he thinks for humanity’s sake, defines and will control access to Humanity, the classic mode of acquisition of spiritual power by priests (Baudrillard, 1993 [1976], p.125-195). Positivism in this sense appropriates to itself, by attempting to control “Humanity”, the basic spontaneous privilege of humanity itself. But the feature which is typically Comtean in its extremism is that the Highest Priest will have absolute ascendancy in the spiritual organisation: “He is the priesthood, and, at need, could change all its members, leaving the spiritual organism intact. The Papacy, at all times hampered by the college

17 Giorgio Agamben (2013 [2012]) traces the shift in Catholic tradition from prayer as worship to duty as repayment of debt.

18 The project of a history “*sans noms*” is mentioned in Comte’s *Cours* (1975 [1830-1842] vol.2, p.239); and in a letter of 1856 he wrote: “I alone have instituted the cult of great men” (cited in Pickering, 1993-2009, vol.3, p.413). The material fetishes of this cult are discussed by Wolf Lepenies, 2012 (2010).

of cardinals, and often liable to Councils, was never able to attain the ascendancy which will be allowed the Pontificate of Humanity.” (2001 [1851-1854], vol.4, p.226)¹⁹. Comte does not seem to be able to imagine the scenario in which the priesthood itself disposes the High Priest.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, it is possible to make a number of observations on the utopian experiment. First of all two crucial concepts were needed to work out the full logic of the argument for Isidore: altruism and sociocracy. It also required a redefinition of religion for the scheme to function, and indeed also a reconsideration of science, positivism and of theory. Secondly, Comte had great difficulty in working through his historical method both in the objective and subjective modes. In *The Positive Philosophy* he left the third state in rather vague outline, although he claimed his “twofold” positive and negative series were constructed in relation to it. In *System* he claims to have shown that the construction of his utopia was based on the logic of historical progression and a deduction as to the normal state of human existence. In fact he faced a real problem. In constructing his utopia he simply fabricated a new historical sequence as a retro-genealogy to 1789 in which he placed his own work as the key to universal history. Thirdly, the method of construction of the utopia was therefore certainly based on a theory of cultural accumulation, but it is clear that certain deeply held “subjective” cultural values played a crucial role in his identification of this accumulation. Fourthly, Comte also claims his

19 This passage is strikingly similar to Saint-Simon's *Political Parable* of 1819 (Saint-Simon, 1975, p.194-197). Comte here, in a kind of Religious Parable, only briefly indicated, suggests that only the High Priest himself would be indispensable to the spiritual corporation. Elsewhere he admits the Pontiff is not infallible and that, if he should “go wrong”, the temporal powers would cease the stipend, and the spiritual powers would be at the mercy of charity (2001 [1851-1854], vol.4, p.294). There is another even more striking allusion to the political parable in Comte's discussion of species useful to Humanity: “such animals should be regarded henceforth as accessory members of the Great Being, a title to which they have a far higher claim than many useless members of the human race who have never been anything but a burden to Humanity. Those who doubt this should think of the privation that Humanity would suffer even now by the loss of these subordinate allies.” (*ibid.*, vol.1, p.496).

utopia is a prophecy: something like this utopia will eventually be realised. It is thus instructive to note that the scenario of a large number of small states overseen by a spiritual power has not appeared, yet. But if we concede that a combination of spiritual and temporal powers was anticipated as the first step on the route to *Isidore* then the question is: have there, or are there states which exhibit the following characteristics: a free market economy dominated by banking, extreme concentration of wealth that escapes legal control, a socio-cratic formation of its elites, and submissive proletariat²⁰ ?

Looking at fiction-theory, and ideal types, it is interesting to note that the invention of sociocracy (Comte locates a “monocratic” form on route to the positive polity) and Weber’s ideal type of “monocratic” bureaucracy (1978 [1922], vol.1, p.223-226; vol.2, p.956-1005) share many features. Yet the important term *sociocratic* does not exist in modern sociology after the Lester Ward generation. In *Nineteen Eighty-four* George Orwell identifies the Party machine as in some way modelled on such an idea: the ruling organisation is simply a “ruling group as long as it can nominate its successors”. So “the Party is not concerned with perpetuating its blood but with perpetuating itself, who wields power is not important provided that the hierarchical structure remains the same” (Orwell, 1989 [1949], p.218).

Comte saw the problems here. He saw that the allocation of agents to functions would be imperfect and cause justifiable resentment. His solution was to insist that the spiritual authority would, through lengthy education, instil resignation. The transition period of proletarian dictatorship, “with the aim of eliminating the bourgeoisie as the main seat of Western anarchism” in the Comtean prophecy only more firmly entrenched this proletariat as a fixed stratum at the bottom of the status hierarchy (2001 [1851-1854], vol.4, p.393-394). There is great inequality and a significantly greater concentration of capital—hostility to which is overcome through religious training instilled by the new priesthood, which now monopolises medicine,

20 By *sociocratic* is meant precisely those formations where status is not reproduced by birth, or by free elections, but self-perpetuating patrician selection and adoption, which is, according to Comte, a true meritocracy.

education, astronomy and philosophy (*ibid.*, vol.3, p.171-175). Indeed capital is no longer primarily subject to law, but principally to moral constraint. And looked at precisely from this point of view, the indication that the first step in the route would be an articulation of the new spiritual power with a dictatorship (secular or not) opened the possibility of a new kind of tyranny (Saint-Simon, 1975, p.198) warned repeatedly of the dangers of allowing the spiritual corporation access to power). Weber (1978 [1922], vol.2, p.1159-1163) called this formation “caesaropapism”, that is the control and direction of the spiritual by the temporal power; and the combination or fusion in the theory of the modern party-state (the ideological and repressive state apparatuses) is such a formation (Wernick, 2001, p. 228-239).

This danger is signalled by Comte. The route is open also to the totalitarian regulation of life of humanity by the believers in “Humanity”. Comte even anticipates calling on “true believers to feel themselves bound to furnish to the priesthood the information as to persons without which its influence would be too uncertain”—and he notes “never was a system of political police so effectively carried out, at scarcely any cost, as in 1793, when under the irresistible impulse of public necessities, all true patriots considered it their duty to make known to the chiefs of the state such facts as could usefully enlighten their conduct”, just as “the Catholic regime [...] was once seconded by the communications rightly made by domestics with respect to their masters” (Comte, 1901, p.116). This utopia was, it seems, always insecure (Vernon, 2005).

It is clear that the immediate effect of the utopia of the religion of Humanity on its adherents was disastrous. Fictions were devised to be aids to analysis (2001 [1851-1854], vol.1, p.530). Instead of using it as a basis for the analysis of the metaphysical state and its developments, adherents were drawn into endless attempts to realise it or to justify it as the solution to all problems, even after the social structures of Western Europe had changed in the last quarter of the XIXth century leaving Comteans stranded. John Bridges (1915), among others, is witness to the resignation of positivists to the new systems of state welfare and education. They stubbornly continued and sustained a number of campaigns for example against imperia-

lism²¹. Perhaps John Gray's judgement (2007) should be heeded: it is always in the attempt to realise utopias that the essential and irresolvable problems begin. Or at the limit Eric Wright (2010) presents the oxymoron of "real utopias" that is "realisable" with the means available at any given time; it is interesting to note that Comte's own very detailed and excessively precise planning and timing of *Isidore* only further underlined its utopian character²². Indeed Comte relegates absolute reality to metaphysics and perverse science.

Finally, giving Comte's utopia the name *Isidore* makes its unique contours easier to identify. With its hierarchies, great inequalities, its sociocratic caste-like strata and submissive but watchful and knowing proletariat, its holy virginal and loving matriarchy, its sacerdotalised astronomical wisdom with, at its apex, the High Priest of "Theory", it is a utopia devoted to "continuity". Its subjective "imaginative reconstruction of society" provokes a certain kind of theoretical invention. It was from this utopian matrix that modern culture received from Comte the hardly negligible conception of positive religion devoted to altruism, and organised as a sociocracy. Such a utopia, of such grandeur, should not be homeless.

AN. On a personal note, I taught "Comte" as a topic on courses in social theory for many years at Loughborough University (almost each year from 1972-2007). At first the courses followed the formal indications given by Comte himself. But as I experimented with teaching I found the temptation to look at his fictions and utopia, and students were more than willing to participate. Some were outstanding at what I call social science fiction (not SF in the narrow sense). The utopian name used in this article (*Isidore*, Comte's first Christian name) was invented by students over the years, and I acknowledge a debt to them here. I would also like to thank Michel Bourdeau, Mike Hawkins and Andrew Wernick for valuable comments on an early version of this paper.

21 Examined in detail by Claey, 2010a, p.47-123.

22 As noted by Mill, 1961 (1865), p.164.

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